

12-2009

Our University: Toleration and Conviction

Walter V. Wendler

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, wendler@siu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/arch_hepc

Recommended Citation

Wendler, Walter V., "Our University: Toleration and Conviction" (2009). *Higher Education Policy Commentary*. Paper 9.
http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/arch_hepc/9

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Architecture at OpenSIUC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Higher Education Policy Commentary by an authorized administrator of OpenSIUC. For more information, please contact opensiuc@lib.siu.edu.

Our University: Toleration and Conviction

Third in a series of thoughts regarding the intersection of faith and reason in university life.

Knife edges are the places where greatness lives in organizations. The sides of a knife don't cut, but the well whetted edge of a knife is where the action is. Faith has been placed on the flat side of the knife at universities. For sharpness there must be two sides to the knife on campus - faith and reason. Truth lives on the deliberately honed edge of faith and reason.

The idea that faith expressed in relation to reason must pollute either or both is wrong-headed. So too is the opposite.

For intellectual acuity to flourish on our campus an open mind is needed - and a willingness to listen and civilly deliberate perspectives of faith and reason.

There are not many new issues to address regarding faith matters at my church. Nearly all members agree on the most important considerations of the human condition. The omnipotence of God, original sin, the deity of Christ, salvation through grace, and human beings as agents of free will created in God's image: on these points there are few disagreements. But the university is a crucible that refines me and my faith. But it can only function in the presence of other faiths, and no faith at all is a form of faith in self, or nature, or process, or something.

Only a machine can be faithless.

Many people, more studied than I, have deliberated the nexus of tolerance and conviction. Tolerance has become a synonym for thoughtlessness. It is maligned by misuse, misunderstanding, and moral relativism precisely because matters of faith are not part of public dialog: important anywhere, but essential to a university. Tolerance without a "second perspective" to tolerate is meaningless.

The very purpose and nature of a good university is lost in a theater without faith written into the play.

If ideas are treated as detached, or detachable in modern discourse, everyone is happy. It is possible to have dispassionate discussion about events of history, absent any personal connection to them. It is passion and conviction about ideas that cause problems. And by definition, matters of faith require conviction. The scientific method, based as it is on replicability, needs no conviction except allegiance to it. Some would argue this, in itself, to be a manifestation of faith.

Current events around global warming show the degree to which matters of ideology, sometimes confused with faith, are masqueraded as science. Only reveal that which supports your perspective.

Where is truth, scientific or divine, in this equation?

The faith that I hold is strong and a matter of personal conviction. I will not allow myself to demand that anyone believes as I do: That is a matter of free will. For example, a person who believes that human life begins at conception is deemed to be intolerant of those who believe life begins at any other time. If asked, I will explain my position relative to my faith, just as assuredly as if asked the rate of descent of a falling apple at sea level I will respond: 32 feet per second squared; a position explained not by my faith, but by physics.

The idea that these perspectives cannot co-habit is limited. If science appears to disprove a faith view, so be it. And if a deep faith conviction supports that which science cannot, so be it.

A cure for cancer will be a product of science, a miraculous healing of the same dreaded disease, a product of faith.

Toleration requires that each listens respectfully to all. Conviction demands that personal perspective is valued by you and others through belief, faith. These perspectives can live side by side in a thinking human being in search of truth.

Is our university, or any other, for anything else?

Merry Christmas.